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AUTHOR Washabaugh, Bill
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ABSTRACT

This study reports on attitudes and opinions about matters of concern to young Puerto Rican men in a small city in New England. There is considerable variability of expressed attitudes within the population, and the goal of this study is to discover situational correlates of this variability. Through participant observation and by review of ethnography of Puerto Ricans, four themes were determined to be topics of interest and continual conversation to young Puerto Rican men in Milltown. These themes are: getting money, displaying masculinity through sexual behavior, dealing with conflict and discrimination, and adjusting unstable plans for residence. All men of working age place a very high priority on finding a job. Reported attitudes on these four themes varied considerably. Observational data and the literature on immigrants suggest that length of residence and place of initial immigration are probably important factors determining variability. But these factors do not account for the data reported here in any simple or straightforward manner. Short-term residents appear to be more assimilated and more satisfied with Milltown than are long-term residents. Length of residence coupled with economic factors produce attitudinal contrasts among those men who have immigrated directly to Milltown. (Author/JM)

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Correlates of attitude variability of young Puerto Rican men in Milltown, New England.

Bill Washabaugh
Wayne State University, Detroit
Michigan

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ABSTRACT

CORRELATES OF ATTITUDE VARIABILITY OF YOUNG PUERTO RICAN MEN IN MILLTOWN, NEW ENGLAND

This study fills a gap in our knowledge of Puerto Rican immigrants to the mainland by providing descriptive information about immigrants living in a small town rather than in a large city. In particular, this paper attempts to account for variability of immigrant attitudes on thematic topics. Length of residence and place of initial immigration are tested as factors influencing this variability. The association discovered is not that predicted. A complexity of factors peculiar to Puerto Rican immigration accounts for the varieties of attitudes and opinions. The Puerto Rican immigrants in this small town must be considered transients, intending to remain in Milltown only long enough to save money to return to their homeland. Their attitudes and opinions changes as their residence plans change. Immigrants who have resided in a metropolitan area prior to living in Milltown are subject to different situational pressures than direct-immigrants to Milltown. Generally, it is an oversimplification to suggest that Puerto Ricans become progressively more assimilated with increased length of residence on the mainland.

Few anthropological or sociological studies describe Puerto Rican people who live in small towns on the mainland. Hence, our knowledge of Puerto Rican immigrants is limited. We have adequate knowledge about the large Puerto Rican populations living in New York, Philadelphia, or Chicago, but we know little about Puerto Ricans in smaller cities and towns.

This study reports on attitudes and opinions about matters of concern to young Puerto Rican men in a small city in New England. There is considerable variability of expressed attitudes within the population, and the goal of this study is to discover situational correlates of this variability.

Milltown[1] is a city of fifteen thousand people which includes large numbers of persons both of East European and of French Canadian descent. There are about two hundred Negroes and about fifteen hundred Puerto Ricans.

Two factories in Milltown hire large numbers of Puerto Ricans. One is a textile mill around which the city has been built, and the other is a poultry dressing plant. Housing facilities are very poor. A recent unpublished report on housing problems states that "the city's major problem is an acute shortage of housing units...especially rental housing." The result of this shortage is that Puerto Ricans must pay high rents for dilapidated housing, which they then overcrowd.

The Puerto Rican population first came to Milltown in 1955 when a group of laborers from a nearby large city became commuters to the poultry dressing plant. These Puerto Ricans moved to Milltown and later notified kinsmen of occupational opportunities there.

The Puerto Rican population remained small for five to seven years. Between 1965 and 1967 the population rose to fifteen hundred. Most of these immigrants came directly to Milltown from rural areas near Mayaguez or Juana Diaz, Puerto Rico. A few Puerto Ricans came to Milltown from New York City. The migration back to Puerto Rico from 1967 to the present seems to have balanced the immigration, holding the Puerto Rican population to about fifteen hundred.

Through participant observation and by review of ethnography of Puerto Ricans, I determined four themes which are topics of interest and continual conversation to young Puerto Rican men in Milltown. These themes are: getting money (Lewis 1965:xxxvii), displaying masculinity through sexual behavior (Landy 1959:108), dealing with conflict and discrimination (Fitzpatrick (1955), and adjusting unstable plans for residence.

Some glimpses of different behaviors related to getting money reveal that all men of working age place a very high priority on finding a job. Most men will accept any job available, even though it be distasteful. Young men in school will typically take part-time or full-time work. However, men differ in their

economic perseverance. Some men seem more punctilious about getting to work than others. Some men habitually bet their money in dice games while others consider gambling immoral and a waste.

Regarding the theme of sexuality, almost all male sexual behavior is related to "machismo." "Machismo" is more than just "manliness" (Steward 1956:47). It implies manly qualities such as exercise of sexual potential, lack of fear of others, and aggressiveness in defense of ones reputation. A "muy macho" holds a high social status among his peers. "Machismo" is evident in the behavior of Puerto Rican men. Some men, whether married or single, take pride in the sexual conquest of many women. Other married men do not go in search of other women; they value conjugal fidelity. However, even such men as these acknowledge that, if given the opportunity, they would sleep with another woman to maintain their masculine reputation, that is, to appear "macho."

Concerning the theme of dealing with conflict, Puerto Ricans in Milltown have a number of situations which provoke anger and violence. For one, there is continual friction between the people from Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, and those from Juana Diaz. The Puerto Ricans from Juana Diaz are dark skinned and come from an area with a highly mechanized sugar cane industry. Sidney Mintz (1960:147) says they are proud of their industry and modern conveniences; they consider people who inhabit the less modernized hill country, such as that around Mayaguez, to be

"jibaros," that is, peasants or hillbillies. The people from around Mayaguez are light-skinned, and feel themselves superior to the darker-skinned people of Juana Diaz. These two sets of feelings meet head on in Milltown.

Discrimination evokes violence from the young and aggressive Puerto Rican men. Conflicts over the dating of Milltown girls have sparked a large scale confrontation, complete with firearms, between the indigenous youth of Milltown and the Puerto Ricans. Altercations have arisen over discrimination in housing practices and harassment by police.

Regarding the final theme, I observed that men make residence changes rather sporadically. They move from town to town on the mainland, and back to Puerto Rico, sometimes with no plans for residence or work when they arrive. Men who are married move less often, but that is no assurance that they have settled permanently in Milltown.

When I began to probe for attitudes on these four themes I discovered that the reported attitudes and opinions varied considerably.[2] What accounts for this variability? Observational data and the literature on immigrants suggest that length of residence and place of initial immigration are probably important factors determining variability.[3]

Padilla (1958:162) and Heiss (1966) both suggest that length of residence in the new environment is a factor correlated with attitude variability. Heiss (1966) found length of residence

to be significantly related to attitudinal differences among Italian immigrants in Australia. He discovered that the longer immigrants resided in Australia, the more satisfied they were with their new environment. Length of residence was also found to be correlated with degree of assimilation.

Using these observations we should be able to predict certain attitude patterns for long and short terms residents in Milltown. We might expect long-term residents to be more satisfied in Milltown than short-term residents. They should show signs of becoming assimilated, taking on some of the attitudes of the surrounding lower-middle class European-based community and they might intend to remain in Milltown. On the other hand, short-term residents should be dissatisfied with the community and be planning to leave. They should have attitudes that differ markedly from those of the surrounding European-based community.

I tested these predictions using an indicator of length of residence which divides short-term from long-term at the three year mark. I chose this time period because it seems that Puerto Rican men typically learn English, an important factor in their assimilation, after about three years of residence.

Satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the immigrants is indicated in a number of ways. I asked how they liked living in Milltown, and whether they thought the community was doing anything to help Puerto Ricans. Finally I asked whether they planned to stay in or leave Milltown.

The degree of assimilation is measured by attitudes toward extramarital sex and towards saving money. Lower-middle class American attitudes about sexual behavior and about saving money are rather conservative. We might expect, then, that a person more assimilated to a lower-middle class American way of life will be less permissive about sex and more frugal with money.

The opinions and attitudes of Puerto Rican men in Milltown do not validate the above predictions. Long-term residents say that they are satisfied with Milltown, but their opinions about the way Milltown treats Puerto Ricans show anything but complete satisfaction. The majority of long-term residents are little concerned with saving money and are liberal in their attitudes towards extramarital sex. Still these long-term residents often intend to remain in Milltown. In general, attitudes and opinions of long-term residents do not indicate assimilation or increasing satisfaction with life in Milltown.

Short-term residents expressed satisfaction with living in the city and they seemed quite pleased with all that the city was doing for them. They often seemed unaware of discrimination, or at least unconcerned by it. Most, however, planned to leave Milltown after a short time. They often said that their plan in coming to Milltown was to work for three years, save money, and return to their home in Puerto Rico. Their attitudes toward money seem to reflect that resolve. They show a willingness to save their money. Their attitudes toward sex are also conservative. Most feel that they should try to be completely faithful to their wives.

A second factor, place of initial residence on the mainland, is also probably related to variability of attitudes and opinions because the first mainland community in which an immigrant resides probably conditions his attitudes toward mainland life. Different attitudes will be conditioned by initial residence in a metropolitan area and in a small city or town. The pressures of metropolitan areas differ from those of small cities on the mainland. Jobs are more abundant in cities, and so most Puerto Ricans move directly to large cities (Senior 1954). The immigrants living in large cities are less isolated than those in Milltown. I have been informed by numerous Puerto Ricans that one must be a strong fighter to face the racial violence of the cities. Padilla (1958:198) has suggested that in New York there are great social pressures to learn English quickly and to shake off the appearance of being a newcomer. All these pressures accompanying initial residence in a metropolitan area might instill sensitivity to discrimination and develop speedier assimilation in such Puerto Ricans prior to their arrival in Milltown. Therefore we can expect that the attitudes of those Puerto Ricans who have lived in large cities on the mainland will exhibit a greater degree of assimilation and more sensitivity to discrimination than Puerto Ricans who came directly to Milltown.

I tested and found this expectation partly true. The men who lived in New York are almost unanimously dissatisfied with Milltown. They feel that Milltown does not try to help Puerto Ricans at all. Almost all of these men too intend to leave the

city, saying that they are unhappy or that the town is too dull, not enough action. These opinions are held by most New York Puerto Ricans regardless of how long they have resided on the mainland.

However it is difficult to determine the degree of assimilation of these New York Puerto Ricans. Most of the men, again regardless of their length of residence, would like to save money, but they are permissive with regard to extramarital sex.

Why is it that short-term residents appear to be more assimilated, and more satisfied with Milltown than are long-term residents? Length of residence is associated here, not with a process of assimilation, but with a process of change in the residence plans of the immigrants. A typical Puerto Rican arrives in Milltown in order to make money, and intends to return to Puerto Rico as soon as he has saved a good deal. Therefore he saves and does not indulge in gambling or free spending. He feels that Milltown is attempting to help Puerto Ricans and that he is treated fairly, mainly because he is earning better money than he did at home. He is typically unaware or unconcerned that the city is actually doing little to alleviate the relatively poor housing conditions and other forms of discrimination because he plans to remain in Milltown only temporarily.

After about three years he does one of two things; he returns to Puerto Rico with whatever money he has been able to save, or he stays in Milltown and his resolve to return to

Puerto Rico begins to weaken. He might remain because he has grown dependent upon the good wages which he cannot earn in Puerto Rico, or because he has formed deep attachments to relatives and friends in Milltown. With the intention of returning home weakened, the immigrant finds that saving money becomes less important. Therefore he typically "loosens up," spending money on cars and clothes. Attitudes towards sex similarly become more liberal. Meanwhile he has grown aware of his status as a member of a minority group in Milltown and is sensitive to discrimination. Perhaps, too, he is more concerned about discrimination because he intends to remain. He complains about discrimination and police harassment. Thus length of residence coupled with economic factors produce attitudinal contrasts among those men who have immigrated directly to Milltown.

Place of initial immigration, and not length of residence, is associated with the attitudes of Puerto Ricans from large cities. Immigrants who had previously lived in large cities are dissatisfied with Milltown. Such immigrants were initially exposed to the pressures of city life. They developed attitudes and opinions corresponding to those pressures. When they moved to Milltown, those preconceived attitudes biased their perception of life in Milltown. Thus immigrants who had previously experienced the racial tension of large cities, feel that Milltown is dead, (Campbell 1961:341).

These findings reveal the complexity of the Puerto Rican immigrant situation. Their attitudes and opinions are influenced by the type of initial residence on the mainland, and by the changes occurring in their plans for residence. The single factor of assimilation with increased length of residence does not account for varieties of attitudes and opinions.

NOTES

1 a pseudonym

2 The respondents were young men between the ages of fourteen and thirty years. I chose the minimum age of fourteen because this appears to be the age at which boys are typically accepted into adult groups (Padilla 1958:223). The maximum age of thirty was set because the men over this age were more difficult for me to contact.

Sixty-two young men were questioned, using a field schedule. Of sixty-five men whom I asked for an interview, only three refused. The sample was not randomly selected because there is no demographic data on the population. However I sought Puerto Ricans in each of the three geographical areas in town where Puerto Ricans are concentrated. Also I questioned men who had come from different parts of the island, making sure to get a good selection of people from both Mayaguez and Juana Diaz.

3 In this paper I discuss only two independent variables, that is, length of residence and place of initial immigration. However in compiling these data I tested for four other variables, including, city of origin in Puerto Rico, age at the time of migration, age of the immigrant, and education. Only the variables discussed in this paper shoed any positive association with immigrant attitudes.

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